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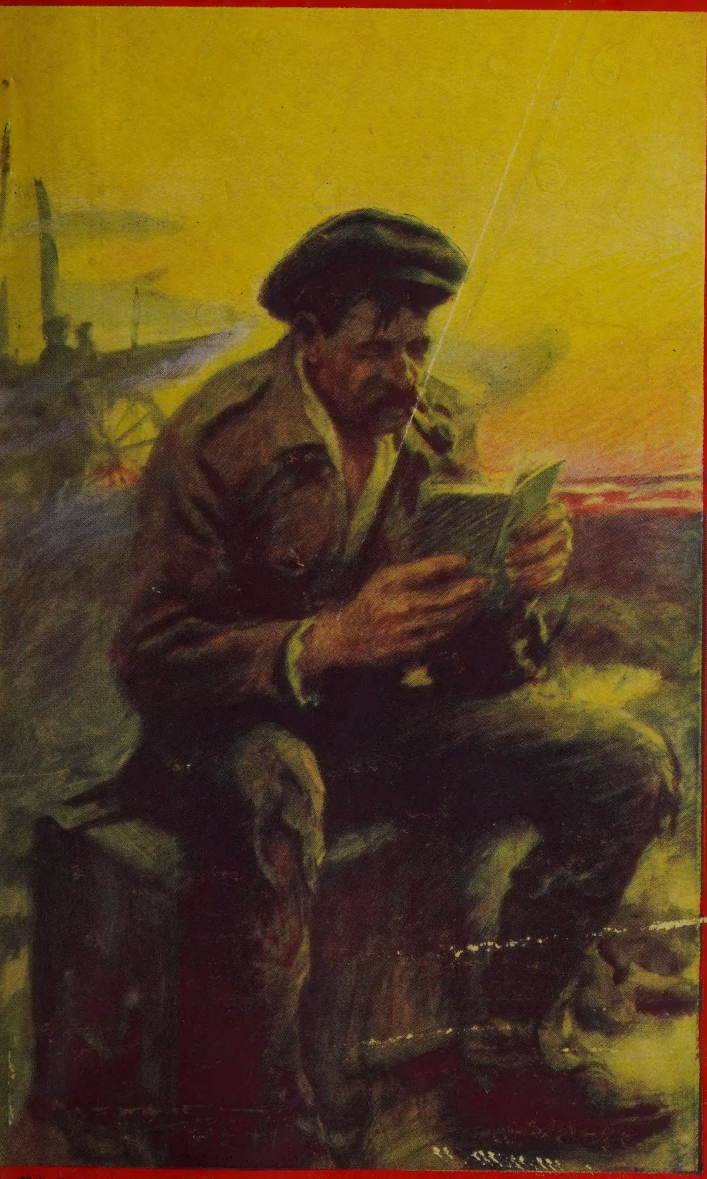
THE STORY-TELLER

for MAY, 1924



"I 'ad only six books to remember. I learned the names by 'eart . . . one, called *Persuasion*, first. . . ."

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CASSELL'S

The Whistling Troubadour

By Warwick Deeping

"Romney whistled one more tune, keeping the group in the vestibule under observation, and as he made his last circuit of the Tartarin lounge he invited largesse, holding out his blue cap. But he was excited, and once or twice some of his notes were flat and hurried, for he had seen in Ghool and the girl a reproduction in real life of the tale of Svengali and Trilby."

A COUPLE of chars-a-bancs and two or three private cars had pulled up outside "La Reserve" on the upper Corniche road, and some of the occupants were gathered round the green tables, drinking coffee or wine. "La Reserve" was very new and rather small, with brilliant white walls and shutters painted a horizon blue. It flew the "tricolour," and, looking down from its heights, smiled a white smile at those who passed upon the dusty road. Monsieur Blanc, the patron and creator of this upland café, had come to an arrangement with some of the drivers of the chars-a-bancs, and in pulling up here they suggested pleasant thirsts to the multifarious tourists, who bought picture postcards, praised the scenery, and acquired an eagerness for dinner.

Here, suddenly, as though he had slid down the grey rocks, appeared a bland young man in blue. He smiled. He had a broad, fair face, strong teeth, and audacious but friendly eyes. He wore the blue cap of an Alpine rifleman, blue putties, brown breeches, and a sort of Tyrolese jacket edged with white braid. He had an "air." He bowed to the people in the cars and at the little green tables.

"*Messieurs, mesdames, je suis Le Troubadour, Le Sifleur de Provence. Attendez, s'il vous plait.*"

He smiled on them all, and began to whistle, walking slowly to and fro with a slight swing of the shoulders, head cocked, eyes steady. He whistled amazingly; he had the shrill notes of a fife and the deeper appeal of a flute, and sometimes his whistling had a blackbird's rich plaintiveness. He gave them "Tales of Hoffman," perhaps because he knew that most people like their music with a little honey to it, and they sat and listened and observed him, for he was worth watching for his grace of movement and his pleasant, boyish swagger.

"*Là, là—un joli garçon.*"

A moustached Frenchwoman applauded.

"*Regardez les belles jambes!*"

The whistler bowed, smiled, and his smile made all the world his friend.

He seemed to have moments of shyness, that gallant shyness that is so pleasing to women.

"*Merci, mesdames et messieurs. Une petite chanson de Russie.*"

He whistled them some Russian melody, and his movements became slower and his eyes melancholy.

"Certainly—he is an artist," said someone.

Another group was discussing his nationality.

"Swiss."

"No, from the Tyrol."

But, as a matter of fact, the whistler was English, one—Peter Romney—who preferred the blue sky and a few easy francs to London ceilings and slavery.

On the back seat of a blue char-a-banc a girl and an old man sat listening. They had not descended to partake of coffee, and the eyes of the girl were fixed upon the whistler. She might have been a bird listening to her mate with the coming of spring, and she was a creature of black velvet and white silk, wide-eyed, slim, with a little red mouth, pensive and poignant. She stared like a child. And beside her the old man was trimming his finger-nails, his greyish red beard tousled up over the collar of his ulster. He had the face of a goat, quick, red-lidded eyes, and an air of pinched sagacity. He

smiled to himself, his harsh skin cracking like parchment, while the scissors snipped at his pink and meticulous nails.

The whistler was in full flood, giving out deep and plaintive notes, and moving slowly towards the huge blue automobile, when an upward glance brought his eyes to the eyes of the girl above him. For a moment his head seemed set stiffly in a surprised stare. There was an almost imperceptible weakening of a note, and then he had faced about, and was continuing his slow pacing in front of the white house.

But when he turned and came back towards the char-a-banc he fixed his eyes on the girl as though he would have wished her to understand that all his music was for her. He whistled that old English song, "Drink to me only with thine eyes," and broodingly her dark beauty looked down upon him.

The man with the red eyes and the scraggy beard had become aware of this sudden linking-up of hearts and of glances. He took a peep at the whistling vagabond with his freckles and his shyly audacious eyes.

"Dear me, the fellow works hard for his money."

He threw Le Siffleur a franc piece, and Romney gave them a bow, which went largely to the little lady.

"Thank you."

He swung away, smiling, but turned again before he had gone three yards, and the suddenness of his glance discovered something, a twinge of pain on the girl's face, a dilating of her pupils. She drew in her breath with a little sibilant start.

"Mr. Redbeard" had turned his back. He appeared to be examining a map, nor could Peter Romney surmise that he had jabbed the girl's wrist with the point of his penknife. But that spasm of pain was unmistakable, that little agonized gasp and the shadow of fear in the eyes.

She turned away, and Romney saw her settle herself stiffly and decorously beside the man whose beard looked as though it had had an egg broken in it. The tourists were climbing back into the char-a-banc. The driver was buttoning up his coat.

The whistler pivoted on the ball of one foot, and with his back to the char-a-banc, whistled "The Cock of the North," until, with a pr'rump and a puff of blue smoke, the automobile took a rude farewell of him.

Monsieur Blanc of "La Reserve," a genial and oily little man, strolled out and spoke to the whistler.

"That is rather a good turn of yours, *mon ami*. You and I might be useful to each other."

"That's so," said the Englishman; "but I do better at the hotels. Thanks all the same."

He smiled, whistled a bar or two of "Madalon," and, gathering up a knapsack and a stick from one of the green chairs, set off along the road in the direction of La Turbie.

II

Peter Romney looked at the sea and the sky and at the great soaring cliffs, and at the white towns glimmering below, but chiefly he was conscious of that sudden start of pain in the eyes of the girl. Why had she winced like that?—just as though she were abnormally sensitive to discords, and he had whistled the most atrociously false note.

"There is a reason for things, and something had hurt her. Suppose that old curmudgeon is her father. Well, anyway, I shall not see her again."

Yet the dark appeal of her had set his youth moving to music and coloured his thoughts, and as he swung along the mountain road with the Tete de Chien looming ahead of him, his vagabond philosophy dealt with the problem of dualism. There were times when he hungered for a mate, someone to tread the road with him and share its adventures, its little simple meals eaten on a sunny rock or under the shade of trees, its glasses of wine at roadside inns, its spaciousness, its irresponsible freedom. A mate who would laugh and sing, and snuggle up to him like a bird when the wind blew cold.

And then he laughed at himself. "Village idiot! Trailing a girl round with you! Your freedom goes when you strike up a partnership with a petticoat. This freedom, what? My gollywoggo! And yet—I should like to know what made her wince like that."

He covered the three miles to La Turbie in less than an hour, and, sighting the great grey drum of the Roman monument and the white walls of the houses, he moistened his lips and decided that he was thirsty. He would stop at one of the cafés and drink wine before standing up to whistle small change out of the pockets of the tourists. Good! But La Turbie sprang a surprise upon him, for when he came to the broad space

in the centre of the little town he saw a blue char-a-banc standing at one side of the "place." The bonnet flaps were raised, and a coatless driver was using French swear-words on a recalcitrant engine.

Romney drew in against a wall. His quick eyes searched the "place" and the groups sitting outside the café. Yes, they were there at one of the tables, Redbeard with a glass of vermouth in front of him, the girl with nothing. The man was reading a paper, holding it close to his face, while the girl watched the life about her with an air of questioning it and of finding no answer.

The Whistler added swift movement to the suddenness of a vagrant inspiration. On the right of him an archway opened into one of the narrow, secret southern streets, full of shadows and half-shuttered windows, and dark entries, and doors that seemed sealed with silence. A few tourists idled over the cobbles, vaguely interested and vaguely inarticulate. Romney slipped through the archway, and, putting himself in the shadow of a wall, began to whistle.

He could see the two seated at the café table, but it was more than likely that they could not see him, for the westering sun was pouring slantwise upon them, and the archway was curtained with shadow. He whistled an old English song, and, like a blackbird hidden in a bush, he piped for that other bird to hear.

She did hear. He saw her throw sudden swift glances to and fro. A restlessness seemed to seize her. She glanced at her companion on the other side of the table, as though to discover how much he had heard, but the man was intent upon his paper. Moreover, he was not very quick of hearing.

She said something to him and stood up. He eyed her for a moment, nodded, and watched her cross the open space to the char-a-banc. She said something to the driver; in fact, she asked him how long it would be before they would start for Mentone.

"Half an hour, m'amselle."

The old man saw her pass round the side of the char-a-banc and walk listlessly across the "place." She paused and stared up at the houses; it seemed obvious that she had no purpose, and with a little sinister crinkling of his countenance he ceased to watch her, and resumed the reading of his paper.

The girl approached the gateway, and from the shadowiness within came the plaintive whistling of one of Laurence Hope's Kashmiri love-songs, "Pale hands I love——" She paused, wide-eyed, and as she paused the music went away from her, trailing its passionate piping up the narrow, winding alley. She followed. There was something wayward and fantastic in the player's mood, and like a Pied Piper he threaded the narrow streets and passage-ways, luring her after him. Her eyes showed little flickers of light, spicules of gold in the great black pupils.

The whistling changed to a merry measure, and she saw him in an archway ahead of her, where the sun was shining. He was looking back.

She followed. She came out into the sunlight and the broad space where the huge, broken drum of Augustus's tower rose from its square platform. Masses of stones and sections of columns lay about, and on one of these columns he was seated, pack laid beside him, one hand holding his blue cap. His eyes were looking straight at her, shy, smiling, compelling eyes. His hair had a slight wave to it, and the glossiness of plumage.

She moved forward, her eyes on his. She knew now that he was going to speak to her, that he wanted to speak to her, and she wondered what manner of man he would show himself to be. Would he be like all those other men——? She gave the faintest shudder.

He stood up. He smiled, and when she was within three yards of him he made her a bow. Also, she fancied that his colour deepened.

"So my legs have proved more reliable than your automobile?"

She looked up at him, her head slightly on one side, like a bird considering the timbre of another bird's tone.

"Yes. But you must have walked very quickly."

"Perhaps. It is a good road, and the air makes your heels light. I don't know whether you are afraid of a stone seat?"

She sat down on the column and looked up at the ruin, while Romney remained for a moment standing beside her.

"Wonderful chaps, the old Romans. How long is your driver going to be tinkering at the car?"

"He said half an hour."

She had a soft voice, a voice without edges, and vaguely plaintive.

"Half an hour in French means——"

"Yes, we shall be late. How wonderfully you whistle."

"Thank you. My motto is 'Whistle and live.' Are you staying near here?"

She had an air of hesitating. He had sat down about a yard from her, and she knew that his question was not an idle one.

"Yes."

"With your father?"

"My adopted father."

She caught a glance from his grey eyes.

"We are staying at Monte Carlo. We have a little villa there."

"I suppose you would not tell me——?"

Her eyelids flickered.

"Ghool. His name is Ghool."

"And yours, of course?"

"I suppose so."

She was aware of having surprised him. And she was conscious, too, that he was looking at her with a kind of questioning intentness. She flushed and pulled at one sleeve, an unconscious gesture.

"Pansy—that is my name."

"Pansy——"

He had glanced at her hands, and suddenly he saw something that made his grey eyes grow sharp and grave, a minute fresh wound on her wrist, a red line crusted with a thread of blood.

She discovered his glance, and quickly and instinctively she made a movement of drawing down her sleeve.

Her eyes rallied to his.

"You have not told me——"

"Oh, my name is Romney—Peter Romney. In the old days I should have been a troubadour."

"What's that?"

"An idle sort of fellow who goes about stringing verses and singing them——"

"But you whistle."

"Fewer whistlers than singers. Would you mind telling me something?"

She looked frightened.

"What?"

"How you got that little mark?"

He saw that he had frightened her, but it seemed to him that she was hesitating between two different fears. She twisted her hands and looked tragic, nor was she to be left to tell him what he wished to know, for some other influence intervened. Almost, it was as though someone had touched her. She started, and, turning quickly, glanced towards the archway through which they had come.

Romney saw him, too, the goat-headed man with the rusty beard. He was standing in the shadow of the arch and looking towards them. He remained quite still, staring, until the girl rose from the column, and, ignoring Romney, began to walk towards the arch.

Romney stood up.

"Miss Pansy—— Whereabouts in Monte——?"

She did not seem to hear, and as he watched her move away it struck him that there was something peculiar about her walk. It was gliding, yet mechanical. "Like someone walking in their sleep," as he described it to himself. He felt that a dominating force drew her, and that it emanated from the old man under the archway.

Romney saw her join Mr. Ghool. The old man's hand slipped itself under her arm, and the last that Romney saw of them was the man's grey face looking back out of the gloom of the archway. It touched Romney's quick imagination, suggesting some old classic myth, like that of Prosperine and Pluto.

"The gateway of Hades! Now—why?"

They had disappeared, and the Englishman stood staring before picking up his pack.

"That little wound on her arm? She is afraid of the old satyr. Queer! Yes, more than queer."

III

Romney took the funicular railway from La Turbie to Monte Carlo, and passing through the casino gardens and down the hill to the harbour, ascended into Monaco to a little street where cosmopolitan prices did not prevail.

Madame Le Brun was sitting sewing at her window on the first floor, and Romney's ringing of the bell brought her head and shoulders out of the window. She reminded him of a wooden cuckoo bursting out of the door of a cuckoo-clock.

"*Tiens*, it is you!"

Romney pulled off his cap.

"Has madame that little room?"

"To be sure. My son left yesterday to return to the barracks at Toulon. I will come down."

To Madame Le Brun Peter Romney was *bon garçon*. She had a large heart and immense energy, a moustache, a collection of moles on her face, and peculiarly beautiful hands. She had a son and a daughter employed in the Great Babylon, pleasant, sophisticated young persons, who looked daily upon the strange life of the place and then

went home to domesticated wholesomeness. They heard all the gossip; they had their picking out of many of the scandals, and Madame Le Brun knew as much as her children.

She called Monte Carlo—"Le Magazin des Sots." One might be employed there to sell unnecessary luxuries to a number of silly people, but when you had finished your job you returned home and took up your knitting.

She let Romney in.

"So you have come to whistle to us again, monsieur?"

"All the old songs. You know, one must live."

"But last time, if you remember——"

"Yes, I know. I did knock a man down. It was necessary. I may take money from idiots, but I do not take insults from blackguards."

She closed the door, and, leading the way to a little salon, she sat down, and after regarding him with a shrewd and motherly look, she smiled.

"Why have you come back here again?"

"A whim."

"Oh, that sort of thing. You should go where most of the old English ladies and the m'amselles——"

"Madame must not poke fun at my countrywomen!"

"It is kind fun. You see, it is like this. You—who can blush quite prettily——"

"Madame!"

"My dear, it is a great compliment—like the modesty of your charming Prince. And you whistle to the old ladies the dear sentimental things, and they think you romantic."

"I am romantic."

"Exactly. You appeal to the eternal romance in women. You are the interesting vagabond with freckles and a smile. They say: 'Poor fellow, he is a real artist. There must be some mystery.' And they put ten franc notes on the plate."

"They do."

"But here——"

"Yes, that's true."

"You have not a sinful face, or a leer at the back of your eyes, or the stump of a tail sticking out. People bite here, and scratch. It is not a sentimental place."

"Are you sure?"

She met his roguish look.

"So—that's it! You were going to Menton?"

"I was."

"And you digressed?"

"At La Turbie and by the way of the funicular."

"A serious digression."

"How can one tell? Anyhow, I shall try my luck here—no, not at the tables. Someone is in pain, madame."

"Oh, *là-là, toujours romantique!*"

"Guilty. But, madame, have you ever heard of a gentleman named Monsieur Ghool?"

"Ghool! What a name! No. What sort of a man?"

"A goat-like man with red eyes and a little short-pointed beard, grey, with egg in it. Yes, a rather cruel face."

"It would be—— I will ask Edouard."

"The fact is, I want to find out where Monsieur Ghool lives."

"Is he a vampire?"

"Possibly. He looks as though he might have business here."

Romney went up to the little room under the roof with its window looking out upon other roofs and windows with washing hanging from them, and beyond all this cubism, these coloured squares and triangles of wall and tile and wood, he could command the headland of Monaco and the sea. The room was meticulously clean, and it smelt of polish. There was fresh water in the jug, and a towel ready, and when Romney had splashed to his heart's content, he unpacked his knapsack and laid out his belongings on the bed. His kit included a pair of trousers and two fine white shirts, also, that most useful of articles, a "housewife." Buttons will shed themselves, and since Peter Romney proposed to wear his trousers that evening, and they needed attention, he sat down by the window and solemnly plied needle and thread.

Madame Le Brun called up the stairs to him.

"Monsieur, where will you take your supper? With us—*en famille?*"

Romney, with his trousers dangling, replied to her.

"Thank you, madame. I will. By the way, have you one of the local papers with a list of the visitors at the hotels and villas?"

"No."

"Well, I must go out and buy one. Also, I must earn a little money tonight."

Having attended to his trousers he sallied out and bought a paper, and sat on one of the seats in the casino gardens, while the exotic brilliance of the grass and flowers grew less vivid as the dusk came down. The place became lit, and

these gardens seemed to re-emerge into the artificial light like women reappearing after painting their faces. Romney studied his paper by the glare of a big lamp. He could find no such name as Ghool, and perhaps he had not expected to find it. His impression was that Mr. Ghool's villa, wherever it was, would not advertise itself among the pleasure houses, and that Mr. Ghool was more likely to be one of the "bleeders" than one of the "bled."

"Wonder what his game is? He has some game. I ought to know the difference between the codfish and the shark."

A woman came and sat on Romney's seat. She was highly perfumed, but quietly dressed, with a face of chalk and a mouth of blood. She studied Romney, flicking swift glances at him.

He rose, and directly he moved she spoke.

"It is Monsieur le Siffleur. I remember. My dear, have you any of the 'white stuff' on you?"

She hailed him as one of her "world," and he smiled down at her, and shook his head.

"Sorry, no. I don't trade in it. By the way, do you know a man named Ghool?"

She gave him a suspicious glance.

"Never heard of him. Does he——?"

"Oh, perhaps. I wondered if you knew him. Good night."

He strolled back to Madame Le Brun's, and found Edouard and Desiree in the little salon. Edouard was in his shirt sleeves, and Desiree was making baby linen. They welcomed him.

"How far have you been this time, monsieur?"

"Oh, just as far as the casino."

"No, no. On the road?"

"To Tamaris, ma'mselle. Do you know it?"

"Near Toulon. Oh, yes, Etienne has spoken of it."

Edouard had laid aside his paper, and was looking at Romney with his large, wise brown eyes. He was a philosopher. He threw off his cares when he took off his coat.

"Madame la Mère has asked me——"

"Yes, do you know the name?"

"No."

"No one does."

"It is an ugly name."

"So is he. Oh, I'll find out. If I had a name like Ghool——!"

"Monsieur would change it!"

"I'd throw it into the sea. And an octopus would get indigestion."

They supped, and at the end of the meal Romney went up to his room, fastened a blue silk scarf round his throat, ran his hands through his hair, and lit a cigarette. At the door of the salon he loitered a moment to speak to Edouard

"I shall try some of the hotels. What about the Tartarin? Will they kick me out?"

"Madame Remy runs it. Ask for her—and smile."

"Thanks."

The Hotel Tartarin was one of the quieter hotels, and when Romney entered its sedate vestibule he was stopped by the concierge and asked his business. Romney smiled at him like a friend, breathed a short explanation, and added the potent syllables, "Ten per cent." The concierge understood him, Romney's interest having become his, he went to Madame Remy, who was eating her dinner in her room behind the bureau, and explained to her that the "Siffleur de Provence" wished to serenade her guests, and would madame grant him permission.

Madame came out to have a look at Peter, and liking his freckles and his faint flushes and his smile, she gave him her benediction.

"At a quarter to nine—in the lounge. And you will wish to make a collection?"

"With madame's permission. We have to live. But I will give a quarter of it to the 'Crippled Soldiers.'"

"Good. At a quarter to nine."

Romney took a chair in the vestibule, and whistled soft tunes to one of the page-boys. He had a view of the lounge, which was on a lower level than the vestibule, a long and narrow room, all mirrors, gilding, and red velvet. The guests of the Tartarin were emerging from the *salle-a-manger*, and taking their favourite chairs round the wicker-work tables. Waiters hurried in with trays of coffee.

Romney was watching the glass doors of the *salle-a-manger*. He saw the *maître d'hotel* open one of the leaves of the door, and bow and smile to a big man with a bald head, a man with a double chin and weak eyes magnified by high-powered pince-nez. The fat fellow had had friends dining with him, and he was shepherding them out into the lounge, his chubby and rather foolish face shining with well-fed benignity.

Romney pursed up his lips as though to whistle, for the fat fellow's guests were Pansy and Mr. Ghool.

The Whistling Troubadour

IV

Peter Romney's years numbered seven-and-twenty, but in his knowledge of the world, and especially of that world in which queer people manage to live on the lapses and weaknesses of the respectable and the wealthy, he was much older than his years. Yet he had kept his boyishness, his wholesome zest in life. All the various forms of hyper-civilized sottishness repelled him, for he was a child of the open air.

So, as he sat in the vestibule of the Hotel Tartarin, partly screened by a palm in a huge faience pot, and observed the fat man and his two guests, he was not long in getting the "atmosphere" of the group. He disliked it. He disliked the two men, for it seemed to him that one of them was engaged in fooling the other, and even this particular form of foolishness was unpleasant.

Romney watched the girl, and as he watched her the strange and instant appeal that had flashed upon him outside La Reserve grew more urgent and generous. Her face was expressionless. She sat there like a wax figure in a costumier's window, while the fat fellow burbled and beamed, and gave her absurd and tender glances through his high-powered glasses.

A figure of white wax, with midnight eyes, and a red and plaintive mouth! Yes, she seemed a figure of wax, and Mr. Ghool was the modeller. The plastic youth of her was shaped by his hands.

Romney lit a cigarette, and frowned at the smoke he blew from it.

Queer! Yes, more than queer. Mere queerness would not have piqued him, or brought him into the affair as a passionate partizan. He was old enough to know that a baby face may be the most deceptive of masks, and that the angel mouth may be full of astonishing blasphemies. But there was something in him that stood up stoutly and claimed that still, silent girl as a creature of whiteness.

He glanced at the clock on the wall. A quarter to nine! With an air of grave involvement he stood up and threw his cigarette end into the palm pot, and, walking towards the open doors of the lounge, he paused at the top of the steps and began to whistle.

"Tears, idle tears, I know not what
they mean——
Tears from the depths of some
divine despair."

He saw Pansy start in her chair. It was as though she had been asleep, and his whistling had broken her sleep. Her eyes rose swiftly to his; the wax of her face took on a tinge of colour.

He transferred his glance to the face of Mr. Ghool. The lounge was brilliantly lit, and the face of Mr. Ghool stood out against the folds of a red velvet curtain. The eyebrows were raised slightly over the red eyes; the mouth was whimsical, with touches of cruel humour. Mr. Ghool appeared both surprised and amused. He fingered the rusty ochre of his beard, and said something to his stout friend with the glasses.

Romney descended two of the steps, and, cap in hand, smiling, he bowed to the room.

"Mesdames, messieurs, by the kind permission of Madame Remy, and with your consent, I will try and show you how a man can make music out of whistling."

There were smiles and slight hand-clapping from some of the women. Most of the men looked bored, or vaguely resentful. These "entertainers" were a nuisance.

Romney smiled.

"Please, I do not wish to interfere with anybody's conversation. Music while you eat, or music while you talk, ladies and gentlemen. I enjoy my own music, so no one need pity me."

He caught the sheep-like eyes of the fat fellow staring up at him, and they quickened in him the spirit of audacity and mischief. He threw back his head and laughed, and bursting into that merry, swaggering old tune, "Soldiers in the Park," he came down the last two steps and began a gaillard promenade between the chairs and tables. His eyes roved round the room, and for a time he avoided glancing at the three people who interested him.

Mr. Ghool was lighting a cigar. The whistling appeared to irritate him, and he leant upon the arm of his chair and jerked a foot. He had a sidelong view for Pansy, who was watching Romney's feet as though she dared not look higher.

The fat man, whose name was Budd, made playful conversation.

"Whistling Rufus—what? How do you like it?"

"He whistles very well."

She was shy of Mr. Budd, and she did not like him.

"Yes. These people seem to think us a lot of children. I wonder they don't

bring in a Punch and Judy show. Does it bore you, Ghool?"

Ghool's maxillary muscles retracted his thin lips.

"My dear sir, after a good dinner——! Psychism and food do not harmonize."

"I suppose that's so. We will make a move whenever you wish. I'm coming back with you. May I?"

"Of course. We might try. I think the girl is in a good mood."

"By the way, I have a book I want to show you. It has some remarkable photographs, ectoplasm—you know. Supposing you come up to my room?"

"Delighted."

"Miss Pansy can listen to this young steam-engine."

"Yes," and Ghool's tongue brushed his lips; "she will be all right."

Budd rose, and, bending over the girl, asked her to excuse them for five minutes.

"I want to show Mr. Ghool a book."

She made a slight, consenting movement of the head, and the two men went up the red carpeted stairs and entered the lift. The doors closed on them, and as the doors closed Romney changed the temper of his music. He paused, seemed to reflect, whistled a few bars of a song, and then addressed the room.

"Perhaps—someone will choose a piece of music. Mademoiselle, here?"

He stood by her chair, smiling. She was sitting a little apart from the nearest group, and for a moment her eyes lifted to his.

"I cannot think of a tune, monsieur."

He stood attentive, respectful.

"'The Street where my Lady lives.' Do you know that song?"

Her eyelids flickered.

"The rue Rodin. Oh, how silly of me. I thought——"

He straightened, smiling.

"Mademoiselle here has set me a puzzle. It is to whistle the tune she has running in her head. I will try. Musical telepathy, messieurs et mesdames."

He wandered up and down for a few moments with a rapt look. And then suddenly he began to whistle the song he had whistled in the shadow of the narrow street at La Turbie. He did not look at the girl; he drifted about the room with a dreamy air. Presently he paused.

"Is it correct, mademoiselle?"

She made a movement of the head, clasping her hands together in her lap.

"Quite correct, monsieur."

The room applauded.

Romney paused in front of a smiling old Englishwoman. He bowed.

"Would madame think of a tune?"

She agreed, but this time Romney did not get it, and he covered his failure with one of his half-shy and half-audacious smiles.

"Perhaps madame is too classical for me."

He began another tune, and as he began it he saw the lift descending. It came to rest; the page opened the doors, and Mr. Ghool and his friend stepped out. Ghool was saying something to Mr. Budd, and a smile passed between them.

"Yes, there is extraordinary sympathy between us. Shall I give you a proof?"

"Do."

"We will stand here in the vestibule and I will will her to join us. She will come up the steps and say: 'Mr. Budd, we have had a most delightful evening.'"

"Splendid."

Romney saw all that happened. The girl had turned her chair so that her profile was towards the vestibule, nor had she seen the two men emerge from the lift. And again, as at La Turbie, she made a sudden quick movement as though someone had touched her, and, turning her head, looked up at Mr. Ghool. She rose, still gazing in the direction of the vestibule, and moving towards the steps ascended them with that slow and gliding movement.

Romney had stopped whistling, but as she reached the top of the steps he broke into the song that had become like a bird call between them. She heard it; she turned her head slightly to one side, and seemed to hesitate, like an automaton whose machinery falters momentarily. Then she went on and out into the vestibule to where the two men were standing.

Her eyes were fixed on Ghool's eyes, held by them. They blinked, and hers blinked in response. She gave Mr. Budd a vague smile.

"Mr. Budd, we have had a most delightful evening."

V

ROMNEY whistled one more tune, keeping the group in the vestibule under observation, and as he made his last circuit of the Tartarin lounge he invited largesse, holding out his blue cap. But he was excited, and once or twice some of his notes were flat and hurried, for he had seen in Ghool and the girl a reproduction in real life of the tale of

Svengali and Trilby. He had no doubt at all that the man dominated Pansy, and that he made some use of her, and that his power inspired terror.

He made his bow to the lounge of the Tartarin, and ascended the steps leading to the vestibule. Budd was helping Pansy on with her cloak, and Ghool, cigar in mouth, was looking in a mirror and pretending to adjust his scarf. Peter displayed the smiling hardihood of the vagabond and the player. He held out his cap to Mr. Budd, and wished him good luck.

"*Bon chance,* monsieur."

Budd dropped a five franc-note into the blue cap, and Peter, wishing them good night, made a hurried escape into the bureau, where the concierge was waiting for him. He had no time to count his money and to apportion to the concierge his proper share, for the party in the vestibule was ready to leave, and it was Romney's intention to leave five seconds after them.

"Here, *mon ami,* I am in a hurry, take a handful of the stuff."

The concierge looked amused. He had a quick eye, and he had noticed something lying on the red carpet of the vestibule.

"M'amselle has dropped her flowers."

He pocketed his share of the money, and smiled as he watched "Le Siffleur" dash out into the vestibule and pick up a bunch of violets.

"My perquisite."

"*Bien!*"

Romney threw him a friendly glance, and disappeared through the glass doors into the night. He had the bunch of violets in his hand, and over his head a sky that was dusted with stars. The violets touched his lips, and as he inhaled the scent of them he felt assured that the flowers had not dropped by chance. But for the moment the pursuit was the thing that mattered, and ahead of him, and passing under a street lamp, he saw three figures.

"The rue Rodin."

He set out to shadow the three, and the pursuit took him up past the gardens and along the Corniche to the right. He kept on the opposite pavement and about thirty yards behind Ghool, Mr. Budd and the girl. Presently he saw them disappear into a side street on the left, and from that point began a slow climb among the maze of houses rising above the sea. Mr. Budd was slow on his feet, and Romney had to dawdle and hang back under the shadow of the houses.

Presently they turned again to the left, and on a plate fastened to a villa wall close to a lamp Romney saw the words—"Rue Rodin." He became more cautious. He could hear the voices of the two men, but the street was badly lit, and he was afraid of blundering upon them and raising their suspicions. He was aware of a blur ahead of him on the pavement, and then—he heard the slamming of a door.

They had entered.

He walked quickly on, and coming to the door of the villa which he imagined to be Mr. Ghool's, he examined it for some sign of a name or a number. It was a solid door, and on it he saw something white, like a slip of pasteboard, or a visiting-card, slipped into a brass frame.

Romney stood back and examined the house before he struck a match, and held it close to the card.

"Monsieur Ghool, Medicin Psychique."

Romney blew out the match and threw it into the roadway.

"So that's it. I think I'm beginning to understand."

VI

A very faint and rosy glow was diffused through the room by a lamp that burned on a pedestal in the corner, yet so dim was the light that the faces of the three people seated at the table were like grey masks. The table was a small one, and oblong in shape. At the head of it Pansy half reclined in a high-backed arm-chair, eyes closed, lips parted. Her hands were on the table. Ghool, on her right, held one of them, Mr. Budd, who sat opposite him, the other.

The "sitting" was at an end, and there was a faint stirring of the girl's figure. She began to draw deep breaths, and to make a little, plaintive moaning.

Budd's sheep's eyes looked big and staring behind his glasses.

"Extraordinary!"

Ghool shook his head at him.

"Don't talk yet. Draw your hand away gently. She is coming back."

They sat and watched the girl recovering from her trance, and somewhere in the room a clock ticked. Budd had withdrawn his hand, and was feeling in the breast pocket of his coat for his wallet. His thick lips moved as though he were repeating some words which he did not wish to forget. Ghool, leaning across the table, whispered to him.

"We will slip out before she is quite herself. She is rather sensitive—about

being watched—when she has come back. Some psychics are."

Budd nodded.

"I want to make a few notes. Most extraordinary; facts known to no one else."

"Yes, downstairs."

In the rue Rodin Peter Romney had found a gateway nearly opposite the house of Mr. Ghool, and had posted himself here—well in the shadow—and had been watching the windows. The shutters were closed, and he had been able to detect no light in the front rooms, but after an hour's watching he had seen a yellow radiance diffuse itself through the bars of the shutters covering the windows of the room on the ground floor. The house was alive; things were happening in it.

He waited, and now and again he raised that bunch of flowers to his nostrils, and their perfume was part of his thoughts.

The front door opened, and the two men came out. Mr. Budd, who appeared excited, held Ghool by the arm.

"Of course, I am convinced. Most remarkable. But, look here, walk back with me."

"As far as the gardens."

"Good. I suppose she will be——?"

"Oh, quite. So you can infer that my idea of getting indications——"

"Why, of course; it suggests extraordinary possibilities. And you say some of the 'suicides' communicate?"

"They do. They are earth-bound. The 'rooms' are full of them."

They went off down the street, and Romney remained in his gateway, inspired by the mad idea of getting into the house while Ghool was away. He calculated that it would take the two men a quarter of an hour to reach the gardens, and that the climb back would absorb another twenty minutes. Half an hour—or more! He left his gateway, crossed the street, and tried Ghool's door, but it was locked. The "medicin psychique" used a latchkey.

Romney returned to his gateway.

"If someone—she—would open a window!"

And then—that which he had hoped for—happened.

He heard the click of a catch and the creak of hinges, and one of the shutters swung back from an upper window. A faint, reddish glow filled the window, and he could see the vague outline of a figure, and daring the inference, he assumed it to be the girl's.

He whistled a bar of that song.

He saw the figure move; the shutter began to close, but it did not close completely, and he came out into the street and continued the song. Again he saw the band of light broaden, and the slatted frame swung open. She was leaning out.

"Oh, please—please, Mr. Romney——"

He ceased whistling, and stood looking up.

"I am afraid it is rather late to pay a call——"

"Oh, please go away."

She was frightened, and her fear made him more bold. He glanced down the dark street.

"Pansy, you dropped your flowers in the hotel."

"Did I?"

"May I keep them?"

"Yes—yes, if you will go away."

He moved to the path under the window, and his voice climbed to her pleadingly.

"Yes, I will go away. It is late. Mr. Ghool has gone down as far as the gardens with his friend. But I want you to tell me——"

He saw the shutter move, and he held up a hand.

"Give me one minute. Yes, I know, it must sound absurd, when I have only seen you three times in a day. But I am not a cad, and you can talk to me. Pansy, don't go. Yes, I'll go now, but when can I see you——"

She rested her bosom on the sill.

"Oh, I don't know. Never. He——"

And she closed the shutter, and Romney knew that her fear had shut him out, but just as the fear in her eyes had been the first thing about her that had appealed to him, so now it sent the blood more strongly from his heart. The shutters might be closed, but they could not keep out the human voice.

"I'm sorry, Pansy. Don't be angry with me. But—I must—see you again. Tell me when I can see you, and I will go."

He waited, watching the street, feeling her fear and trying both to understand and to combat it.

"You need not be afraid. I'm not a cad."

Her soft voice seemed to fall from among the stars.

"I am not afraid of you. It is something else. But at eight o'clock each morning——"

"Yes."

"I go marketing. The Magazin de Paris."

"I shall not forget. And now—I am going—but I have your flowers."

When he had gone she opened the shutters, and, folding her arms on the window-sill, she let her head fall on them as though her strength and her courage failed her. She remained there, quite motionless, without a sound, her face hidden, a vague despair in her heart.

Yes, she was afraid, afraid to love and to be loved, afraid of his voice, of his music, of his happy and half-shy smile. What misery was hers! To feel herself shut up in a cage, a slave spirit, a poor, shameful, singing bird that was used as a decoy. What chance had she of being anything else, she who had been snatched from nothingness by this terrible old man? He had taken her childhood, and made it grow to suit his own ends, like a plant set in a window.

She felt a sudden fury against him. She put her lips to that wound on her wrist, and made the blood flow. Yet, even in her passionate anger there was fear.

She was still seated at the open window when John Ghool returned. She did not move, but remained with her back to him, listening to his movements, and imagining his sly, tyrannous smile.

"Well, my dear child, you did very well."

She shivered. A sudden loathing of him and the life they led blew through her like a wind. It was as though Romney's voice, his blackbird's call, had brought all the poignant beauty and cleanness of the spring.

"It's horrible!"

Her voice had a fierce yet frightened huskiness, and old Ghool, who had been moving about the room, stood still, observing her.

"What's that? What's the matter?"

She pressed her chin against the soft curve of her forearm.

"What you make me do. Playing upon people, pretending—— Oh, you know!"

"Don't talk nonsense. We give people what they want, that's all. Besides, it's real."

"Real?"

"Yes, your power. You are psychic, a little prophetess. Why not be proud of it?"

"Proud! How do I know? You send me to sleep, but I feel——"

"You see—things. You saw things to-night that amazed our friend——"

Her shoulders jerked.

"Yes, and he gave you money. They all give you money. It's wrong. You trade on it. If I have this strange power——"

He came and stood over her, and she felt him there, and the soul and body of her winced.

"Don't—don't hit me. I won't bear it—not to-night. I may be nothing better than a monkey."

He laid a hand on her shoulder.

"A little emotional—to-night! Go to bed. Don't let us have any more of this nonsense."

VII

At a quarter to eight Peter Romney was loitering outside the flower-shop opposite the Magazin de Paris with Pansy's bunch of violets pinned to his cap. The little swarthy lady who managed the flower-shop came out and smiled upon him, for it was possible that this romantic loiterer might have looked into her eyes.

"Some flowers, monsieur?"

Romney surveyed the carnations, the tulips, the anemones, the roses.

"Yes, that is an idea, m'amselle. How much are those roses—the deep carmine ones?"

"Two francs each, monsieur."

"Oh, là-là! Well, give me three."

He was slipping the change from a ten franc-note into his pocket when he saw a girl emerge from a side street and walk towards the Magazin de Paris. It was Pansy; she carried a capacious string-bag, and her eyes had a look of haste.

Romney crossed the road. She saw him, and for a moment she appeared to falter, but when he smiled she seemed to take courage and to dare the adventure. She saw the bunch of violets in his cap.

"I was afraid you might not come."

She stood looking up at him, and when she spoke her voice suggested hurry and breathlessness.

"I have so little time. You see, I have to do the marketing and get back."

"And make Mr. Ghool's coffee?"

"Yes. How did you know?"

"Intuition. He gets up late and expects you to be ready to take him his coffee and fresh rolls——"

"Well, he adopted me. It is my part. Please, I mustn't wait——"

She fluttered past him towards the door of the shop, and he went with her.

(Continued on page 259)

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"I'll do the waiting. And then I'll carry your bag."

He lit a cigarette and stared into the shop window while Pansy was buying her fruit and groceries and the little highly flavoured delicacies beloved of Mr. Ghool. She was agitated; she kept glancing at the door, and when she went to the desk to pay for her purchases she dropped part of the money on the floor. And when she emerged she clutched her bag and looked at Romney with eyes of alarm.

He held out a hand for the bag.

"Please——"

"No, I'll carry it. And really—you mustn't——"

But with a smiling gentleness he took the heavy bag from her, and offered her the roses.

"You carry these. I bought them for you. More your style."

Her eyes were all light and shadow.

"I'll hold them while—— But you must take them back again. You see—I——"

He was looking down at her with a big, grave tenderness.

"You little thing, why are you so frightened? I won't come the whole way. But there is one thing I mean to find out."

She walked fast, gazing straight ahead.

"I'm not frightened."

"Is it anything to be ashamed of? Oh—I mean, there is nothing to be ashamed of in my wanting to walk with you, is there? I may be a sort of vagabond, but in these days——"

Her face betrayed a sudden, timid fierceness.

"Oh, we are all vagabonds—worse. Not you. You just—make music."

His eyes grew more grave under a faint frown.

"Supposing we grant that. And Mr. Ghool calls himself a psychic doctor——"

"Don't, please. I don't wish—— Besides——"

"Well?"

"I have known you only since yesterday. What's that? Just nothing. Now, if you go away, it will be just nothing——"

He smiled.

"Now, that's just what it won't be. Things happen queerly—sometimes—Pansy. I'm superstitious, and there is something queer in my meeting you. A serious sort of queerness, just as though it were meant. I'm not going away."

She gave him a frightened stare.

"But—it would be—— Oh, I can't say what I mean. And you have come far enough. Please go back."

She was trembling, and feeling that he was making her suffer, he gave her the bag.

"Do you want me to go away? For good, I mean?"

"Yes, I do. Really. Only I——"

She fled, forgetting to give him back the roses, but her eyes had contradicted all that her frightened voice had said.

Romney walked slowly back to the gardens, and at this early hour he had them to himself. He sat on a seat in the sun and watched the pigeons, and a waiter dusting the tables outside the Café de Paris, and his vagabond philosophy found itself at the cross-roads. What was he going to do? Was this adventure of a day so serious that he must needs leap into it—as youth has always leapt, blindly yet with a cry of exultation? A little pale-faced girl with dusky hair and frightened eyes! What was her appeal? Her fear, and the strangeness of it, looking up into the eyes of his strength?

"I suppose one never knows why the thing happens," he reflected. "That it does happen—is enough."

He thought of her slight figure hurrying away from him, and her carrying off those red roses, nor did he suspect that the colour of them was to be the colour of pain. Pansy had arrived with a sense of breathlessness at the door of the house on the rue Rodin. She left the door open when she went on her early morning marketing, and as she entered the little vestibule and put her bag down on a chair, she realized that she was still clutching Peter Romney's roses. Instinctively, she raised them to her lips, telling herself that she dared not keep these dear flowers, unless, of course, she hid them.

"Ha! you have been buying flowers," said a voice.

Terrified, she glanced at the staircase, and saw Ghool standing there watching her. Some whim or motive had pulled him out of bed; he was in his sloppy grey pyjamas, and his rusty hair hung over his forehead.

"Yes," she said, "just three roses."

He came slowly down the stairs, and the soul of her crouched like a frightened bird. Her dark eyes were raised to his face, as though fear held her fascinated.

"Pretty," he said, "very pretty."

His thin smile changed to a snarl. He snatched the flowers from her, and, pulling the heads from the stalks, threw them on the floor.

"Don't try fibs on me. I'm not such a fool. Who was it gave them to you?"

"I bought them."

"Very nice! That fool Budd, was it?"

"No. Why won't you believe——"

"I never believe a woman. Kisses——! You can tell the man who gave you the flowers that he is a fool. You belong to me."

He seized her by one wrist and twisted it.

"You understand that? You belong to me, body and soul. You will always belong to me."

"Yes—yes, oh, you are hurting me!"

He flung her back against the wall.

"Fudge. You are my property. I can do what I like with you, and you know it. Go and make the coffee."

VIII

For three mornings Peter Romney waited outside the Magazin de Paris, but no Pansy appeared with her frightened eyes and her string bag, and though he haunted the rue Rodin he had no glimpse of her. Ghool he saw strolling down towards the casino, with his red eyes set upon some dubious enterprise, and his thin lips sucking a cigar.

Yet, these three days proved to Romney how serious was the thing that had happened to him.

"She is afraid," he thought; "or, perhaps, that old beast has locked her in. That stain in his beard makes one think of clotted blood."

Meanwhile, he had heard things from Edouard Le Brun, fragments of gossip that drift about in the world below the world of Monte Carlo. Edouard was discreet; he had an ear, and many friends, and Mr. Ghool, in spite of his surreptitious shrewdness, had aroused some curiosity.

"He is one of the 'high-brow gentlemen,' *mon ami*. He is fashionable. Psychism. They say he keeps a medium, a little clairvoyante."

The details of the picture were becoming more definite, and also more poignant and appealing. He saw Pansy as a bird in a cage, a frightened and obedient bird whom this old gentleman brought out to play occult tricks upon his patrons. He dominated her. She was an enslaved soul exploited by this old charlatan.

But was he charlatan? Or was he a man who used powers that are becoming recognized, and twisted them to his own ingenious ends? He played a psychic organ, and the girl was his little monkey, trembling, obedient.

Romney grew grim.

"If I have to go down like Orpheus into Hades——!"

On the fourth morning he was more fortunate, for she came shrinking swiftly along the pavement, and when she saw him she hesitated and stood at gaze. Romney walked slowly up to her, almost expecting her to turn and run, but this morning he saw a new expression in her eyes.

"You still come here? I thought——"

"Each morning. For three mornings I have been disappointed."

"I thought you would grow tired."

"Did you want me to grow tired?"

She avoided his eyes and the frankness of their challenge.

"No. But, you see, he saw the roses. He suspected. For three days he made me——"

Romney turned with her, and his hand touched her arm.

"You little thing, why won't you tell me what it is? He is cruel to you."

"I dare not say——"

"Why, then, you are telling me what I wish to know. You and I have got to understand each other, Pansy. An old man does not frighten me."

She gave him a helpless look.

"But, you don't know."

"I'm going to know."

He slipped his arm under hers, and, realizing that his courage and hardihood would have to dominate her fear, he led her past the doorway of the shop.

"You are coming down into the gardens for twenty minutes, to sit on a seat—and talk."

He had expected her to resist, but that grip of his had seemed to dominate her, to persuade towards a crisis that filled her with both desire and terror. They went down to the gardens and into the sunlight like two lovers, and Romney chose a seat that was aloof from the main walk.

"Sit down, little thing."

"But if he should find out?"

"Let him. A girl has a right to have a lover."

She hid her face from him.

"Oh, but if you knew, you would not wish——"

"Tell me. Is he a beast to you? You owe him nothing if he is——"

"I can't."

He laid a hand on her shoulder.

"Tell me. I think I shall understand. He picked you up when you were about three feet high, and ever since—calling himself your father—he has made you——"

He felt her trembling.

"He makes me earn money."

There was a hidden grimness in Romney's eyes.

"How, dear?"

"I'm what they call a 'medium.' People come to learn things. We live on the money."

There was quick brightening of Romney's eyes.

"Ah, that's it. But, Pansy, there is nothing——"

"But it's not real—not always—I mean."

"You have to pretend?"

"Sometimes. He tells me what I am to say, and I know I am helping him to cheat."

"Always?"

"No, not always. Sometimes I go right off into a deep sleep. If he wishes it. He can make me. Somehow, I can't resist. It's horrible."

Romney felt for her hand.

"How long has this been going on, dear?"

"Ever since I was fifteen."

"And he drags you about with him?"

"He says that I belong to him, body and soul, and that I shall always belong to him. Sometimes—he beats me."

Romney's hand closed hard on hers.

"We'll put an end to that. Let's look at your wrist. Yes. Do you remember, outside that café, when I first saw you, you gave a sudden start of pain?"

"It was his penknife. I don't know why he is so cruel."

"Cruel to you! Some men are born apes or tigers."

Presently she grew restless, for in the rue Rodin Mr. Ghool would be waiting for his coffee, but as Romney walked back with her to the Magazin de Paris he was thinking that some morning very soon Pansy might set out on her marketing and never return.

Gently he hinted at the ultimate adventure.

"When you have got to know me a little better, *ma chérie*, and to trust me——"

"But I do trust you."

"Do you? That's great. But I must earn a little more money here, and then——"

His downward glance caressed her.

"But—he—will never let me go," she said.

"Oh, won't he! If you and I get married—some day, Pansy—well, Mr. Ghool won't be able to bully my wife."

When she had completed her shopping Romney went with her as far as the end of the street leading into the rue Rodin, and here he took leave of her.

"Till to-morrow, little thing. Trust me."

Romney strolled back to the gardens, and making his way to the seat where Pansy had told him her life story, he sat down and considered her problem and his. Evidently old Ghool had an almost hypnotic influence over her, and that influence had to be broken, and if love could not break it, what else could?

"Seems I have got to fight for my little mate."

He was absorbed, and though he was aware of someone sitting down on the other end of the seat he did not glance at the person who had arrived.

"Good morning, Monsieur le Siffleur."

Romney turned quickly. The man who had joined him on the seat was Mr. Ghool.

IX

There was no need for Peter Romney to infer that the "Medicin Psychique had taken an early and an experimental stroll in order to discover whether Pansy had a lover, and if so, who that lover was, for Ghool, smiling that acid smile of his, began with an ironical frankness.

"So you are interested in my daughter, and I suppose she has been telling you——"

He paused to light a cigarette, leaning an elbow on the back of the seat, and facing Romney with complete yet casual assurance.

"Something, yes."

"Ah!" said Mr. Ghool with a glint of his red eyes, "the feminine mind is a wonderful contraption. You and I had better be quite frank with each other. Now, of course, you know—the girl is a hopeless liar."

He appeared amused, watching Romney's grave face.

"Sorry to spoil illusions. But, you see, Pansy is not quite normal. She is

what we call psychic, yes, genuinely so. I discovered her mediumistic powers——"

"And you use them?"

"Exactly. Why not? You whistle money out of people's pockets; I make it materialize more subtly. Now, as I was saying, the girl is not quite normal; she cannot tell the truth, and you may as well know——"

Romney laid a brown hand on the seat and bent nearer to Mr. Ghool.

"Look here, sir, supposing I don't believe you?"

"Well, that's your affair, not mine. It won't concern me in the very least. The girl belongs to me."

He spoke with peculiar emphasis, showing his teeth.

"Probably you don't realize the situation, but I am warning you—in order to save unnecessary trouble. The girl belongs to me. Do you understand?"

"You mean, that you have made her a sort of slave?"

"No, no, not quite that. But my will is hers. She will do what I wish her to do. I control her. See?"

Romney remained silent.

"Well, there you have it. No nice young petticoat-hunter has a chance with her, even though he can whistle like a blackbird. I simply use my influence——"

"You hypnotize her; or, rather——"

"Well? Be frank."

"You use fear, cruelty."

Ghool smiled.

"Come, come, I see she has been romancing. My methods are not quite so crude. My mind dominates her. It is just as well that you should realize this—face the facts. Besides——"

He blew smoke, his voice became slightly menacing.

"Besides, the girl is useful to me. It has taken me years to train her. Do you think I am going to allow a young pup to come gambolling in? Oh, no, my dear sir. I shall keep her."

"Perhaps!"

"You don't think so? Well, that is rather unkind of you. Why not consider the girl? Because——"

He rapped the seat with his knuckles.

"Because, you see, her happiness depends on me. If I willed her to do it she would——"

He paused and looked steadily into Romney's eyes.

"Yes, all sorts of things. She would take a lover, any sort of man, fat—like our friend Mr. Budd. Yes, or she would walk over a cliff or get down in front of a train."

Romney's eyes grew fierce.

"You would make her sell herself? You——"

Ghool held up his cigarette.

"Now—now, abuse is ungentlemanly. I am merely making my position plain to you. I am completely in earnest, my dear sir. The girl belongs to me. She will continue to belong to me. And if you persist——"

They eyed each other.

"I think I can prove to you that my influence is more potent than yours. So I should advise discretion."

"Thanks."

"There are plenty of pretty girls in Monte Carlo. For instance, that swarthy creature who sold you those roses——"

Romney stood up.

"All right. Thanks for your quite beastly frankness. I'll think it over. Good morning."

And he left Ghool lounging on the seat in the early sunshine.

Now, it was obvious to Romney that the man was thoroughly in earnest, and that he had no intention of losing Pansy, but as to the girl being a liar, Romney did not believe it. He had his own reasons for not believing it, and her fear was the best proof of her exploiter's cruelty. Ghool was a cruel beast, an adventurer; you saw his cruelty in his mouth and in his eyes. Nor was there any doubt that he could be dangerous, or that his boast was an empty one, and that the child was wax in his hands.

Romney felt savage, but that smile of his saved him from the stupidity of the savage. He walked in the direction of Monaco, and paused to lean against the parapet and to watch the yachts and steamers and coasting vessels in the harbour, and it occurred to him that a romantic disappearance on some tramp steamer would go a long way towards puzzling Mr. Ghool. Yes, but such an inspiration was double-headed. Ghool might disappear, taking Pansy with him.

Romney watched the motor-boat racing seawards with a froth of whiteness at its bow.

"Seems to me possession is the thing," he reflected. "At present—he has the advantage. But what if I take her from him? What could he do?"

It appeared to Romney that in such case Ghool would be helpless, unless he

(Continued on page 265)

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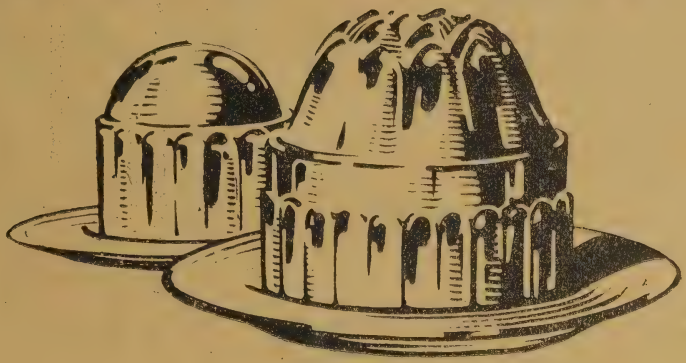

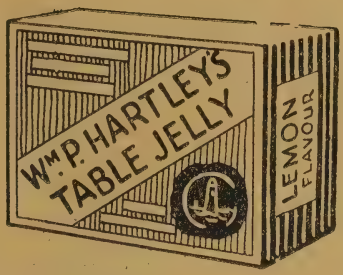

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could make use of that very sinister influence he claimed to hold over the girl. He could not go to the police and say: "A fellow has run away with and married my 'medium.'" Moreover, it was probable that Mr. Ghool was not a person who had any desire to advertise himself to the police.

Meanwhile, he would go home, and if he so chose, make the girl's life a hell.

"I have got to get her out of it," was Romney's decision. "What queer things we are! All this has happened in less than a week."

He returned to the rue Albi and found Madame le Brun just back from marketing and ready for activities in the kitchen. Romney had a great respect for her solidity, her kindliness, and her good sense. She was the sort of woman who, once enlisted on your side, would hold the gate with serene determination. She would sit in the doorway and keep twenty Mr. Ghools outside in the street.

Romney sat down.

"Madame, I am in trouble."

"Money?"

"No. I'm in love."

Madame looked at him as she might have looked at a child that was developing a skin rash.

"I thought that you were a philosopher."

"So I am. But when a philosopher falls in love, *ma foi!*"

"True," she said. "The real thing—a high temperature! Poor Monsieur Peter!"

"Well, madame, since I have no mother I will tell you how it is. You may be able to help me."

So he told her the whole story, and she sat solidly on one of the painted chairs and regarded him with baffling seriousness. She sighed. She gave occasional shrugs of the shoulders. And when he had finished she addressed him as though he were a helpless boy, but a boy who would have to be humoured. Love is a dementia, a blaze, a cataract, and women respect it.

"I see you are quite mad, madder than most. But you would be. Romantic! Oh, *là-là!* And what do you want me to do?"

"Take Pansy into your house."

"*Mon Dieu!*"

"She will be safe here, until I can arrange things. Of course, I will pay. But you are just the woman, madame."

"Oh, am I? You sly rogue! And what about the scandal?"

"Why should there be any scandal? She can have my room, and I will get a room close by. This fellow is not going to be too intimate with the police."

Of course, she said it was absurd, impossible, and then proceeded to surrender. Monsieur Peter need not give up his room. There was an extra bed in Desiree's room, and if the girl came she could sleep with Desiree. Her daughter was persuadable.

"And when do you expect it to happen?"

"Just as soon as I can arrange it, madame. This old man is a cruel devil, and I want to get her away from him."

"It may not be so easy. Old men are sly."

"I have an idea. Edouard will help me. But, madame, you are what we call in English 'a sport.'"

"Oh, yes, you babies have to be humoured."

Romney went up to his room, and, sitting on the bed, pondered a plan. He was greatly troubled about Pansy, and he realized that she might be too scared to dare the adventure with him. Very well, he would carry her off in the good old-fashioned way. Obviously, his plan would be to invade the house while Ghool was out of it, but that might not be easy. It was probable that Pansy would not be allowed to go marketing alone, that Ghool might keep her shut up in the house.

Romney went out to explore the environs of the rue Rodin. The street cut across the slope of the hill, and above it was another roadway dotted with villas, and Romney made the discovery that the houses of the rue Rodin had little gardens running upwards to end in the stone wall built partly above and partly below the level of the upper road. There was a drop of ten feet into the gardens, and Mr. Ghool's house could be approached with comparative ease.

Romney scanned the back windows. Most of them were shuttered, and he saw that there was a door on the ground floor leading into the garden, but he was chary of loitering too openly about the place, and when he had seen what he had wished to see, he disappeared from the neighbourhood. The crux of the problem was how to watch Ghool out of the house without Ghool suspecting that he was being watched. It would not do for Peter to be seen hanging about the rue Rodin.

He appealed to Edouard le Brun, and le Brun produced one Jacquot, aged twelve, a youngster with laughing eyes and the face of an angel.

"The little devil is as sharp as a croupier. Oh, yes, he is used to dodging round corners. He'll enjoy it."

So Jacquot was given five francs, advice, and instructions, and told to watch a particular house for an old gentleman with a reddish stain in his beard. "Le Siffleur" would be on a certain seat in a certain place, and Jacquot would report to him.

As it happened, Mr. Ghool's door did not open until sunset. He emerged; he wore a dark overcoat and a soft felt hat, but under the coat Jacquot observed the white shirt and black tie of the diner-out. Ghool had a "fish" waiting to bite at some hôtel, and Jacquot reported intelligently to Romney.

"A table d'hote evening, monsieur."

Romney hastened to the rue Rodin. His first summons was a formal one; he rang Mr. Ghool's bell and knocked at the door, but after waiting some five minutes for a response that never came, he set out to attack the house from the rear. It was growing dark as he slipped over the wall and dropped into the garden. There were no lights burning in the house, but he noticed that the shutters were not closed over one of the first-floor windows, and that the window itself was open. He tried the garden door and found it locked.

Standing close under the shadow of the wall he began a soft whistling of the familiar song. For a moment nothing happened, and then a shutter high up in the wall swung open, and he could distinguish the outline of a head.

"Pansy!"

"It is you. Oh, Peter——!"

"Come down—and open the door. He has gone out."

"I can't. He has locked me in."

Romney stood back and examined the wall. A water-pipe passed within a yard of the open window on the first floor, and he swarmed up it, swung himself on to the sill, and squeezed through the window.

The house was in darkness, but he found an electric switch on the stairs.

"Pansy?"

"I am here."

Her voice came from the room above, and he was up the stairs and outside the door of the locked room. Old Ghool had taken the key with him.

"Dear, don't be afraid. He has taken the key. I shall have to be rude to the door."

"But, Peter, when he comes back——!"

"You won't be here."

The door was a flimsy thing, and it gave to the second crash of his shoulder. He found her standing there in the middle of the room, her hands over her bosom, her dim face sad between fear and exultation.

"Oh, Peter!"

"Little thing——"

He put an arm round her and felt her wince.

"Dear, my shoulders!"

"Good God, he has been beating you!"

"Yes."

"The beast! He will never do it again. I am taking you away."

And suddenly she clung to him.

"Oh, I'm afraid. But what will happen? He will come back; he will be sure to find me."

"*Ma cherie,* you are going to belong to me, and not to him. We are going to belong to each other. Courage."

He led her out of the room and down the stairs, her head against his shoulder.

"Never mind about a hat. That won't matter. We are just a pair of lovers—out in the dusk. I am taking you to the house of a friend; she's a dear woman, and she'll be kind to you. Have you ever been to sea in a ship, Pansy?"

"No."

"Well, I am going to fix that up. Genoa or Marseilles; we'll just disappear and get married."

But in the vestibule she had a sudden spasm of terror, her two hands gripping his arm.

"But he will find me. He will kill me. You don't know him. He has such power."

Romney took her face between his hands.

"Little thing, I love you. And love is the strongest thing in the world."

X

So Pansy slept in the room of Desiree le Brun, a Pansy who could not believe that she was in a new world made up of new people, people who were kind to you for no reason at all. The two women had mothered her, and when she had shown them the bruises John Ghool had left on her back, they had grown angry.

"The old pig!"

"And such a pretty back, *ma cherie!* There is only one man who has any sort of right to beat a woman."

"And who is that?"

"Her lover."

(Continued on page 269)

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"Do you think Peter will beat me?"

"Peter! Peter couldn't beat a mule. I think not, my dear."

Pansy slept, but ever and again she woke with a start of fear, and lay listening for the sound of footsteps on the stairs, for old Ghool was so real a devil to her that she could imagine him miraculously arriving in this strange house, and carrying her off to the old life. She heard Desiree's quiet breathing, and the sound was reassuring, like the rustle of leaves in some tranquil place far away from the haunts of men.

Then came the morning sunlight and laughter, and things borrowed from this most good-natured of French girls, and breakfast at the le Bruns' table, with coffee and fresh rolls, and Peter sitting next her, and Edouard looking at her kindly with his wise brown eyes. Was it true that she had a lover, and was free? She felt Peter's hand under the table.

"Everyone is so kind."

"Why, yes, it is not a bad sort of world, little thing. And you and I are going to see much more of it."

"To-day? I mean——"

"This morning I am going down to the harbour to try my smile on the sailors."

"You won't leave me long, Peter?"

"I shall leave you with madame. And if anybody should appear here when I am out, you leave him to madame."

When Peter went out Edouard and Desiree had gone to their work, Pansy helped madame in the kitchen, and then asked if she might go to her room.

"I shall feel safer there, madame."

"Safe! Why, the old pig is not going to break into my house."

"But if he comes! He has such power."

"Go up, *ma cherie*. I hope he will come, though I don't see how he is to guess you are here, but, anyway, I should like a few words with him."

Pansy went to Desiree's room, and found some comfort in locking the door, while madame posted herself in her little salon, with the street door bolted. She was darning stockings, and thinking how much she would like to say certain things to Mr. Ghool, when someone knocked at the door, and she went to open it.

Madame confessed afterwards to Peter Romney that she was surprised when she found the old man standing on her doorstep, quite chic and polite. As she described it to Romney: "The old beast purred like a cat. I thought he was going to rub himself against my legs." "Good morning, madame," says he; "I believe Monsieur Romney lodges here." He had found out that. So I asked him what business that was of his, and then —*ma foi*—he assumed as cool as you pleased that his daughter was here. "I wish to speak to her, madame." I confess I was angry and a little hasty. "Indeed, monsieur. One of those nice, fatherly conversations! Yes, we have seen the mark of your eloquence on her back." And then I slammed the door in his face."

Romney looked grave.

"Does she know?"

"Not a thing. She was upstairs."

"But he knows now that she is here. I have not been able to arrange anything yet. I shall try again this afternoon."

Later in the day Romney had better luck, and he returned to the rue Albi about four.

"I have got to go down again. The old tub is run by two brothers, and the one I saw would not fix up anything without his partner."

He held Pansy's face between his hands.

"You want to go, dear?"

"Oh, yes."

"And you'll trust me? You can."

Romney had seen nothing of Mr. Ghool, nor had Ghool attempted a second interview with Madame le Brun, and as Romney went down to the harbour he met the boy Jacquot. It was a mere impulse that made him enlist the boy a second time in his service.

"Hallo! Jacquot. Anything doing?"

"No, monsieur."

"You might keep an eye on the rue Albi. If you should see that old gentleman hanging about I would like to know. I am going down to the harbour."

"Will you be long, monsieur?"

"Oh, half an hour; not much more."

Now at the bottom of the rue Albi a little white café spreads a white awning and green tables over the stones of the Place des Fleurs, and here, at one of the tables, and half hidden by a box tree in a wooden tub, an old man sat with half a bottle of red wine and a glass before him. He saw Romney go by, and was unseen by him. He was in the shadow. He sat very still, eyes half closed, slightly frowning, with the air of a man deep in thought, and yet the motionless figure and the still head suggested intense activity, an activity of mind, will force.

Romney was away less than half an hour. He returned to the rue Albi as the sky began to redden above the housetops. He saw nothing of Jacquot, and at the door of the house he met Madame Le Brun, who had been up the street visiting a neighbour.

Romney's smiling face spoke of success.

"They will take us. They sail early to-morrow for Leghorn."

"So you are happy!"

"I am. I must tell her."

They entered the house together, and Romney's soft whistling filled it. "Pansy," he called. "Pansy." But the house was silent; no door opened, and there was no fluttering of feet upon the stairs.

Romney and the woman looked at each other.

"Perhaps she is asleep. I was not any more than a quarter of an hour. The door could only be opened from the inside."

Romney ran up the stairs calling "Pansy—Pansy." He opened doors and looked into empty rooms, but the bird that he had rescued from the cage had flown.

He came hurrying down with a face of fear.

"She has gone!"

"Impossible!"

"But she has."

"I left her—here."

Romney was out of the door and hurrying down the rue Albi.

XI

At the bottom of the street he met Jacquot, an excited and breathless Jacquot.

"Monsieur—monsieur. I ran to find you. The old man has her——"

"Quick."

"I saw him standing by the café—there. And suddenly the girl came down the street to him. She looked queer, monsieur, so queer."

"How?"

"Just as though her eyes did not see."

"Which way did they go?"

"Down towards the harbour, monsieur. I saw them take one of the paths up to Monaco. They went slowly, very slowly. I ran to find you."

"Thanks, Jacquot. I must hurry.

He ran, and the boy, after running a few steps after him, paused and stood still. He watched Romney disappear, and then he walked on slowly to the house of the Le Bruns.

And Romney, hurrying with the passion of a lover, realized what had happened, and that Ghool's boast had been no thing of air. It was amazing, horrible, but it was probable that this old man could dominate Pansy from a distance, and cast his will upon her like a magic net. He had come, and she had gone to him, blindly, like a creature walking in her sleep.

Romney reached one of the steep paths and series of steps leading up to the headland. His pursuit was a fierce impulse; it had no plan; it could not penetrate the possibilities of the next hour. Why had Ghool taken her up to Monaco—why not to the house in the rue Rodin? What was in the man's mind?

The path brought him to the road below the palace, and he saw all the purple of the sea fretted with the light of the sunset. The houses and trees were turning black. Ahead of him rose an archway, and beyond it the gardens, and just short of the archway, and leaning against the parapet of the cliff wall Romney saw a man waiting. The figure was familiar. It appeared to have posted itself to watch for the coming of an enemy.

Ghool!

Ghool was smoking a cigar. His face was turned towards "Le Siffleur de Provence," and as Romney came near to him he was aware of Mr. Ghool's smile. It was amused, sardonic, challenging, slightly triumphant.

"Good evening, Mr. Whistler."

There were few people about, and Romney's eyes looked ugly, but Ghool seemed to trust in some secret weapon of his own.

"I am glad you have come. I thought that you might come. We have made quite a business of having each other watched."

Romney had paused within two yards of him. He had a feeling that old Ghool was like the detonator connected to a charge of dynamite. If he were touched something might explode.

"What have you done with her?"

"Pansy! Oh, I will show you in a moment. She is quite safe——"

He paused, sniffing the aroma of the cigar.

"Provided—you do not do anything foolish. No, stay here, please. This is my show."

He looked across to Monte Carlo, and pointed with his cigar.

"Fine effect—that! Look at the colour. The casino might be a casket carved out of ivory. Yes, to revert to personal matters, I wanted you here in order to prove to you that when we had our little discussion in the gardens I was not talking through my hat. I said that the girl belonged to me."

Romney's eyes gave him a fierce "Damn you," but he said nothing.

"No need to look cross, my dear sir. I propose showing you the value of authority. I think you will confess that I have you in cold storage, you and your hot emotions. A test case—what?"

"Very well. Get on with it."

"I will. But, by the way, before we walk on, may I warn you that it will be dangerous for you to try any violence."

"For me?"

"Oh, no. For the girl. There might be an accident. I am quite sure that neither of us wants an accident."

He nodded, gave Romney a glance of mockery, and walked on through the gateway. Some distance up the road he diverged into a pathway among the shrubs and trees, and through the black tangle of the foliage the sky showed its fading gold. The path led down to a seat placed in a sort of little bastion on the edge of a cliff. A low wall about two feet high protected the seat from the cliff edge, but there was a sheer drop beyond it.

On the wall a girl was standing, poised like a statue, her face turned towards the sea.

XII

Ghool, standing there in the space behind the seat, pointed his cigar at Pansy like a devil's showman.

"There you are. I put her there, and willed her to remain there. Yes, she is quite safe, so long as you do not interfere. Utterly under my control, you see. And supposing, for the sake of argument, that I suggested that she should throw herself over——"

His red eyes grew fierce.

"Yes, she would do it. And if I believed that you could take her away from me I would will her to do it."

Romney stood very still. He felt like a man bound with invisible cords, all his muscles taut, his hands lusting to take the old man by the throat and choke his arrogance. His impulse was to pitch Mr. Ghool into the sea. But this was no physical struggle, but a grapple between two spirits, two personalities, two opposing streams of the life force. A will that was evil had put the girl there; it kept her there, and even threatened to push her over the edge into the unknown.

And Romney, with his eyes on Pansy's motionless figure, felt—as men have felt of old—that the devil can be overthrown only by some spirit that is stronger than the spirit of evil.

His inspiration came to him. He remembered the simple boast he had made to her in the gardens, that love is the strongest thing on earth, and it seemed to him that life was challenging him to make good that boast. Most strangely the anger went out of him! his face softened; he smiled.

He turned to John Ghool.

"I understand. She cannot belong to both of us, and one of us must have the stronger right to her. You have put her there, and you say that you can keep her there."

The old man nodded.

"Well, supposing I challenge that right? Let us test our rights, one against the other. That's fair?"

"Yes, that's fair. Your will against mine. If she stays on that wall she belongs to me."

"And if—by willing and speaking—I can bring her down to me——"

"Yes, she will be yours."

They regarded each other for a moment with intent hostility, like two armed enemies, whose weapons were invisible. Ghool's red eyes were arrogant; his rusty beard seemed to bristle.

Romney smiled at him, and his face was transfigured. It was the face of the world's youth, a thing of light and of passionate gladness, while the old man's face was a thing of evil shadows.

Romney began to whistle. He whistled like a bird to its mate, softly, with a poignant, fluting tenderness, his eyes fixed upon the figure of the girl. And it seemed to him that something stirred in her; there was a slight movement, like the stirring of a tree when the wind blows. She swayed.

He spoke to her.

"Pansy, I love you. Pansy, I want you. Come to me."

And then, that which his love had willed happened. Slowly she turned about, the last vivid touch of the sunset upon her face. She stretched out her hands. There was a harsh cry from old Ghool, like the angry cry of a bird of prey. She swayed. She came down from the wall into the arms of her lover.

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